



# FOSTERING RESILIENCE THROUGH PLAY



**PlayBoard NI - Leading the Play Agenda**

[www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org)



## Play and resilience

In an ever-changing world, children and young people are now, more than ever, exposed to themes and concepts that they may struggle to process and understand. Additionally, in Northern Ireland 'The Troubles' may be a distant memory for some people, however for others there has been a lasting impact, not just on themselves but on the next generation.

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of mental ill health in the UK (Bunting *et al*, 2012 as cited in O'Neill and Rooney, 2018); this cannot be a coincidence. It is important to consider the trans-generational impact on children and young people and to assess how play can support their resilience, processing, and understanding of the world in which they live, in order to improve the mental health of our next generation.

Resilience is the inner learning and strength that we find to overcome adversity, regardless of how big or small the issues may be. It is our experiences, relationships, and environment that determine and develop our resilience, however resilience is also determined by innate physiological factors that are unique to the individual.

## How can we use play to support our children and young people's mental health?

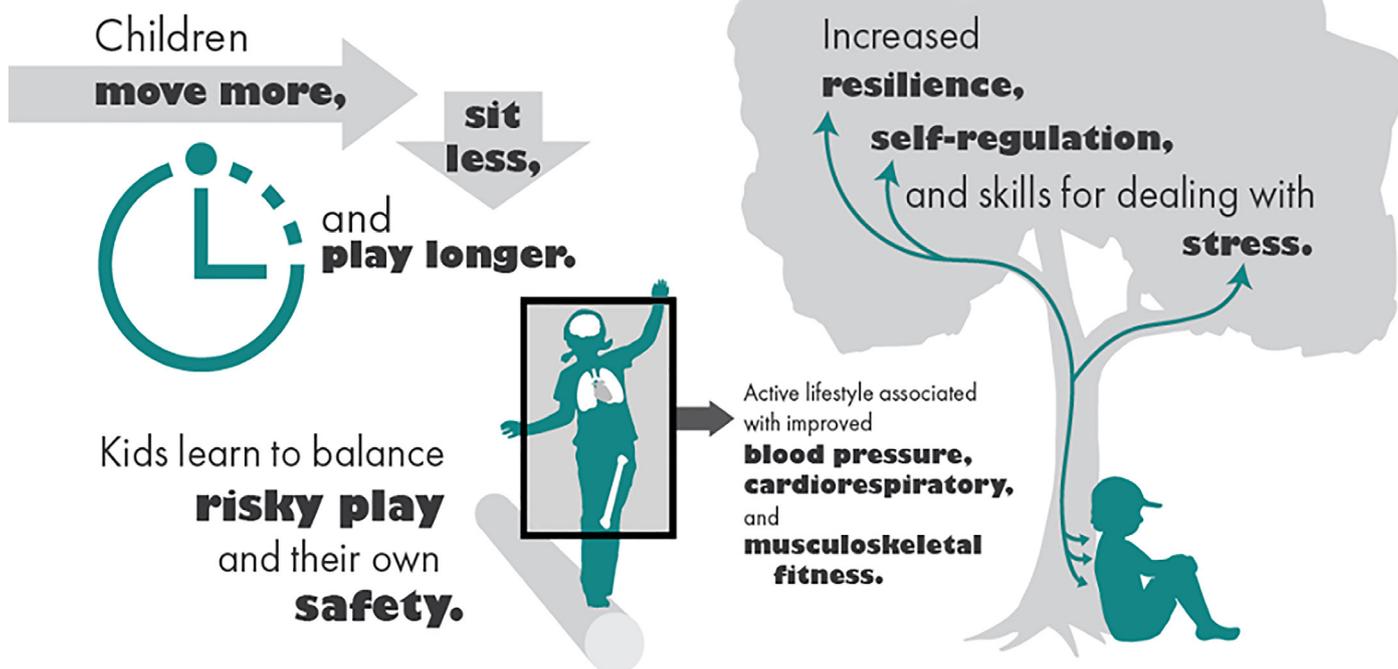
Play is where everything is worked out, through play children and young people are able to take over and be the dictators of their own experiences. Through play they can replay past events and traumas in order to make sense of their experiences and express themselves in a safe environment. The more this happens, the less shocking the event and the more the child can come to terms with their traumas such as death, injury, anger or powerlessness.

Play gives children the medium and pathways to extend thinking and understanding in order to develop and heal. In essence; when faced with uncertainty it is through play that children can develop and practice new behaviours, and try out new strategies or solutions to challenges and emotions. Play is therefore vital for developing resilience and helping children to deal with stress and anxiety, and contributes to good physical and mental health (Stresshealth.org, 2019).

- Play is instrumental in supporting children and young people's mental health and resilience and can have similar benefits for adults too.
- Play is a form of mindfulness as both children and young people, and adults, become engrossed in their play.
- Playing together can support relationship building through shared enjoyment resulting in the body producing oxytocin (whilst enjoying time together) and serotonin (through the happy experience or taking part in physical activity) which is known to reduce stress and contribute to positive mental health.
- Play allows a safe space for both adults and children and young people to explore their feelings and encourages them to talk openly as they are relaxed and not under pressure and are therefore safe to release their feelings.
- Play activities can be joint or independent (if necessary they can come together at the end to talk about what they have done and how they felt).
- Play helps to give children a feeling of normality and joy during an experience of loss, isolation and trauma.
- Play helps children to overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives.
- Play helps children make meaning of what has happened to them, and enables them to experience fun and enjoyment.
- Play offers children an opportunity to explore their own creativity.

As humans we naturally gravitate towards the outdoors, which is particularly beneficial for children and young people's mental health. The outdoors provides an ever-changing environment where children have freedom and space to discover, explore, and experiment using all of their senses in an environment with never ending possibilities. The space gives children and young people the sense of freedom that adults aren't watching them, in turn this gives them the confidence to truly be themselves. Outdoors can be an ideal space for uninterrupted play.

## The benefits of outdoor play



Source: [http://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/portfolio\\_page/benefits-of-outdoor-play-infographic/](http://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/portfolio_page/benefits-of-outdoor-play-infographic/)

## The role of adults

According to the International Play Association - Northern Ireland, if adults can provide a little 'CPR' (be Cool, give Permission, provide Resources), this can help children's resilience and mental health thrive. Adults should:

- Encourage choice and independence in play.
- Encourage independent exploration: including of self, emotions, resources, and identity.
- Give children space and time to play.
- Provide opportunities for risk taking and challenge in a safe environment.
- Be confident and trust in children's autonomy and in their ability, intuition, and risk management.



## Play environment

Ensure that children have access to a rich play environment which includes a variety of open-ended resources. An emotionally and physically safe space which has a variety of possibilities will allow children to invent and extend their play independently.

Examples could include:

- Use of the natural environment. If you don't have access to outdoor space you could go for a walk and collect leaves, flowers, feathers etc. and bring the outdoors indoors.
- Loose parts which can include free and found (age-appropriate) items such as recycled materials, old bed clothes, cushions, photo frames, old keys, old tyres, sponges, boxes of all shapes and sizes, and materials.
- Incorporate smells, different textures, sounds etc. to enable exploration and use of all the senses.
- Allow children to explore feelings and identity.



## Examples of physical activities:

- Create an obstacle course with items/furniture in the house or garden
- Create treasure hunts or scavenger hunts
- Go on a bike ride or take a walk

## Examples of creative play:

- Loose parts play
- Den making
- Arts and crafts (open-ended)
- Letter writing

For lots more play ideas go to [www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org)



The infographic features a central white circle with a teal border containing the text 'THROUGH PLAY CHILDREN CAN'. This central circle is connected by white lines to ten surrounding white circles, each with a teal border. The circles are arranged in a roughly circular pattern around the center. The background is a photograph of a red concrete block with a white arrow pointing upwards, set on a bed of brown mulch. Various colorful objects like a blue block, a green block, and an orange block are scattered in the background.

**THROUGH  
PLAY  
CHILDREN  
CAN**

Feel connected – both to others and to their community

Experience a range of emotions such as happiness, sadness, frustration, disappointment, achievement, and confidence

Learn how to manage their emotions and feelings

Make sense of the world and have a sense of control

Develop a sense of independence and self-sufficiency

Work through and make sense of difficult situations

Develop imagination

Work through uncertainty

Learn to manage risk and challenge

Socialise with friends

Learn to take turns, share and negotiate

**Become resilient**



### References:

O'Neill, S. and Rooney, N. (2018). Mental health in Northern Ireland: an urgent situation. *The Lancet*, 5 (12), P965-966.

Stresshealth.org, (2019). *Stress Health's Official Website*. Available at: [www.stresshealth.org](http://www.stresshealth.org)

International Play Association – Northern Ireland (2020). *A message for parents*.

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